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AUTHOR Ross, Roseanna; Stokes, Colleen Stiles
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ABSTRACT

Older, nontraditional students are appearing with increasing frequency in conventional basic communication classes, and the unique learning needs of this group present a challenge to instructors, who must take into consideration the following: (1) the challenge of the learning process itself, (2) basic problems or concerns of the adult within the classroom, (3) general characteristics of adult learners, and (4) the andragogical view of adult learning. The basic speech communication course has inherent strengths for addressing these nontraditional students' needs, in building verbal skills, integrating the adult into the educational setting, and developing the adult student's self-confidence. An instructor's directed efforts to integrate the nontraditional student into the classroom should consider curriculum design, teaching strategies, and evaluation methods. The curriculum should be problem-oriented rather than subject-oriented, and the grading method individualistic and noncompetitive. Among the teaching strategies that can meet the needs of nontraditional students are modeling, needs assessment and student/instructor consultation, discussion, learning-teaching teams, role playing, and journal writing. Evaluation procedures should clearly define expectations, be supportive, and directly involve the student. Self-evaluation and the communication skills performance assessment scales of M. S. Knowles (1970) are among the noncompetitive evaluation techniques. (HTH)

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IMPLICATIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR INSTRUCTION OF THE NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT IN THE CONVENTIONAL BASIC SPEECH COMMUNICATION COURSE

by

Roseanna G. Ross, Ph.D.

and

Colleen Stiles Stokes, M.A.

St. Cloud State University
Department of Speech Communication
St. Cloud, MN 56301
(612) 255-2216

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IMPLICATIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR INSTRUCTION OF THE NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT IN THE CONVENTIONAL BASIC SPEECH COMMUNICATION COURSE

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Roseanna G. Ross and Colleen Stiles Stokes

Abstract

With the growing number of nontraditional students (25 years of age and older) entering colleges and universities, it is inevitable that this student group will be enrolled in the traditional basic speech class. Nontraditional students have unique learning needs of import to effective basic speech instruction. This paper explores the learning needs of the nontraditional student and proposes strategies for the course instructor to integrate this student into the basic course. These strategies can be employed in the areas of curriculum, methodology, and evaluation.

IMPLICATIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR INSTRUCTION OF THE NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT IN THE CONVENTIONAL BASIC SPEECH COMMUNICATION COURSE

INTRODUCTION

A new student clientele is appearing with increasing frequency in our conventional basic communication classes. This nontraditional student is older than the norm, maintains or has just left a career/job, fills a number of well-defined roles in additional to that of student, and brings to the classroom a wealth of experience and knowledge garnered from a history of coping with a number of significant life events (Kidd, 1973; Lenz & Shaevitz, 1977; Berryman - Fink, 1982). Although this new student clientele is still a minority in most of the conventional basic course classes, the nontraditional student group is steadily increasing in number. In 1977 it was reported that over 7 million people over age 25 were in colleges, with over half of the returnees between 31 and 50 years of age (Lenz & Shaevitz, 1977). In addition, the promise that even larger numbers of nontraditional students will fill our basic communication classes is inherent in the increased societal emphasis on lifelong learning, coupled with the growing numbers of older persons in our society. Between 1970-2000, the estimated number of persons over 20 years of age will have increased from 127 million to 190 million (Lieb-Brilhart, 1978), with a projection that one of every six Americans will be 65 or over by the year 2030 (Reynolds & Koob, 1981). The average age of the student body is moving upward (Turnbull, 1976-1977). Teachers of the basic speech communication classes will inevitably see an increase in the number of nontraditional students.

The unique learning needs specific to this group present a challenge to the instructor of the basic communication course. Many professionals have either ignored, or become frustrated by the one or two members of this different student population who have appeared in the basic course. They have responded by refusing to adjust, demanding this student "fall in line" with the traditional student. Others have recognized that the nontraditional student does differ, and have attempted to adjust by being understanding and flexible with the nontraditional student enrollee. But little has been done to guide the instructor of the basic course in developing strategies that directly address the needs of the nontraditional student. It is essential that direct action be taken to purposefully integrate the needs of nontraditional students into our basic speech curriculum. This paper will explore the issues and suggest strategies for the instructor in meeting the needs of nontraditional students within the learning environment of the conventional basic speech class.

The Basic Course

Relatively little attention in the literature has been given to the basic speech communication course. One of the possible explanations for this lack of research may be due to the variety of definitions for the course and role it plays within the communication department.

Gibson et al., (1980) in their longitudinal study of the basic course define it as "that course either required or recommended for a significant number of undergraduates or that course which the department has or would recommend as a requirement for all or most undergraduates" (p. 1). In their research Gibson et al., (1980) found the basic course to be defined by universities and colleges as either a beginning public speaking class or a hybrid class consisting of public speaking, interpersonal and small group communication. Of the 552 schools analyzed, 51.3% of the basic courses surveyed were public speaking oriented, and 40.3% were hybrid in focus.

This represents a shift in the last 10 years for the basic course to be either public speaking or hybrid in nature (Gibson et al., 1980, p. 2). In this time period, the emphasis has shifted from a more theory oriented approach to a performance oriented course.

The research of Gibson et al., (1980) also signifies that while a shift in emphasis is occuring within the basic course, some fundamental concerns are also surfacing. The concerns focus on the size of the classes being taught (section vs. lab),

student attitude, and fair evaluation of student's performance.

Another issue arising out of this research is the fact that approximately 3/4 of those teaching the basic communication course are graduate students or junior faculty, with a decrease in the percentage of teaching by senior staff (Gibson et al., 1980, p. 5).

While these concerns are of considerable merit, this research surveyed students based on credit hours and not age, hence automatically excluding the nontraditional student's role in the basic course. The neglect to address the presence of the nontraditional student predisposes basic course research to avoid taking into account the nontraditional student.

The Nontraditional Student

Definition

Before directly addressing the needs of the nontraditional student in the conventional basic course, it is important to first define "nontraditional student." In this treatise, nontraditional student refers to the student who is 25 years of age and older, enrolled in the conventional undergraduate college program, and who is seeking goal-directed education (e.g. designed to seek a degree, or to enhance job competence, promotion competitiveness, career change, etc.). This definition is consistent with the definition of the nontraditional student employed in past research (Bishop & VanDyke, 1977; Katz, 1983; Smith, 1979).

This definition of the nontraditional student must be seen in contrast to that of the life-long learning student, who is

that student "learning for the sake of learning rather than taking specified courses and learning certain subject matter" (Schuetz, 1980). Because of the special goals which these two groups of students bring to the classroom, the nontraditional student must be clearly differentiated from the life-long learning student. The nontraditional student is goal oriented, expecting the educational institution to respond to the focus which brought that person to the classroom (Berryman-Fink, 1982). Cross (1982) further defines the nontraditional student:

> the great majority of degree-seeking adults come from working class backgrounds; most are first generation college students...upwardly mobile...and considerably more representative of the general population than are traditional college students. (p. 67)

Nontraditional students are entering the conventional classroom in increasing numbers. In 1979, 42 million adult Americans entered college as nontraditional students (Smith, 1979). Projected enrollments predict a 35% increase in the number of students 25+ enrolled in regular credit courses (Bishop & Van Dyke, 1977). With these increasing numbers, it is inevitable that nontraditional students will be members of our basic speech classes. Smith (1979) appeals to the need for colleges and universities to prepare for the shift in student population by better marketing "our wares to an ever-increasing population of citizens beyond age 25" (p. 101). Communication departments need to address the unique learning needs of this group, and begin the

strategic planning necessary to integrate this student population into the conventional basic speech course.

Unique Learning Needs

In order for communication professionals to develop strategies meeting the nontraditional student's needs, they must understand the learning needs of the nontraditional student in four basic areas: (1) the challenge to the nontraditional student of the learning process itself; (2) basic problems/concerns of the adult within the classroom; (3) general characteristics of adult learners; and (4) the andragogical view of adult learning theory. It is these four areas which will be addressed in the following section.

The process of learning poses a challenge for the non-traditional student. Knowles (1978) explains that learning can be seen as either "a process by which behavior is changed, shaped or controlled," or it can be defined "in terms of growth, development of competencies, and fulfillment of learning" (p. 7). From either perspective, learning implies change, which, as Maslow (1970) explains, stimulates two forces: (1) fear and desire to hang onto the past, and (2) the force to become fully functioning. This pull between the two forces can pose a problem for the adult learner. McClusky (1970) addresses the reluctance of adults to dislocate some of the basic commitments around which their lives are organized. The process of learning can challenge and/or question these commitments. This is complicated by the fact that the adult faces social restraints in

realizing personal learning potential--society views the adult individual as a non-learner; the learning role is not a feature of the adult image (McClusky, 1970). Therefore, as a learner, the nontraditional student faces potentially threatening, yet exciting change, in a society that persists in seeing the adult as a non-learner.

Within the classroom, the nontraditional student faces additional problems. Berryman-Fink (1982) describes the nontraditional student as typically lacking "self confidence and basic study and communication skills" (p. 351). Many of the nontraditional students carry with them, into the classroom, painful memories of their high school or youthful college days which make them hesitant about the college classroom (Lenz & Shaevitz, 1977; More, 1974). In addition, most nontraditional students have an "out-of-phase" feeling, where they feel like a "deviant"--older adults plunged into a youth culture (Lenz & Shaevitz, 1977). This often results in the nontraditional student assuming a low profile, reducing contact and visibility within the setting, at the same time becoming almost compulsive about trying to keep up, compete, with the younger student. More (1974) reports that the nontraditional student also has a low tolerance for ambiguity and therefore thrives best in the classroom where expectations are clearly stated.

To further define characteristics of the nontraditional student, Lindeman (1926) identified five key assumptions about adult learners which have been supported by current research (Knowles, 1978), which have become the base of andragogy, and

which can offer insight for instructors of the nontraditional student. Lindeman's key assumptions are: (1) adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy; (2) adults' orientations to learning are life centered--organized around life situations rather than subjects; (3) experience is the richest resource for adults' learning; (4) adults have a deep need to be self directing so that the teacher's role is to engage in a process of mutual inquiry; (5) individual differences among people increase with age, demanding provision for differences in style, time, pace, etc....

Because of the unique characteristics and learning needs of the nontraditional student, Knowles (1970, 1978) has developed a unified theory of adult learning, identified as andragogy. The four assumptions of andragogy, combined with the aforementioned insights into the specialized needs of the nontraditional student, can help communication educators design classes which can better integrate this population. The initial assumption of andragogy is that of the role of self concept--adults need to be seen by others as self directing; put into the position of being treated as children (which is representative of the conventional pedagogical approach) causes tension which interferes with learning. Secondly, the maturing individual accumulates a reservoir of experience which is a rich resource and broad base for learning; this experience is what contributes to the adult's identity, and teaching styles that deny, devalue, or ignore it are a rejection of the person. Thirdly, the readiness to learn for the older adult student is less a product of academic

pressure and more a product of tasks required to perform evolving social roles. And finally, adults tend to have a problem-centered orientation to learning instead of the child's subject-centered orientation. Therefore, the adult demands immediacy of application.

While there exists little research involving these unique characteristics of the nontraditional student in the basic speech course, the basic speech course, by its nature, does meet some of the nontraditional student's needs.

Strengths of the Basic Course

The basic speech communication course has within it some inherent strengths in addressing the needs of the nontraditional student. This can be seen in the following three areas: in building verbal skills; in integrating the adult into the educational setting; and in developing the adult student's self-confidence.

Peter Hampton notes "verbal skills appear to be of greatest importance because of their most frequent use" (Hampton, 1977, p. 19). In the basic course this area is tapped directly through public speaking and group discussion skills, thus addressing the nontraditional students' need to practically apply what they have learned.

The basic course also serves to integrate the nontraditional student into the educational setting. Since the basic course is often one of the initial courses in a student's program, it plays a major role in the integrating process. Ross and Wagner

(1979) refer to the basic course as an incubation period.

> During this incubation it is vital that the adult learner have an opportunity to experience an embodiment of the learning process. Abstract theory is distant and removed from the student; whereas the skills approach to theory is personal, close to the individual's experience, and allows him immediate integration into the learning process. (p. 9)

The basic course serves during this incubation period to help build self confidence, to aid the nontraditional student to face the challenge of change inherent in the learning process, and to become participatory in the classroom setting.

Strategies for the Instructor

Taking into account the unique learning needs of the nontraditional student in the basic course, and realizing the potential of this course to meet these needs, it is essential instructors make a directed effort to integrate the nontraditional student. This directed effort should include a consideration of three primary areas: curriculum design, teaching strategies, and evaluation methods.

Curriculum

One of the basic assumptions of andragogy directly related to the basic course curriculum is that of problem-orientation versus subject-centered orientation (Knowles, 1978). In the

subject-centered curriculum, course units are defined by logical sequence of content topics. The problem-centered curriculum entails a curriculum organized around problem areas. This problem-centered sequence moves first from field experience, to theory and principles, then to skill practice, and finally to field application.

A second area of curriculum design which can be altered to address the nontraditional student's needs is in selection of grading mode. The traditional curved grading scale generates a competitive atmosphere. The andragogical teacher, on the other hand, strives to design a curriculum which reduces competitiveness (Knowles, 1978). A basic speech class grading scale which is instead based on individual knowledge assessment, progress, and skill learning (straight percentage grading) would better address the nontraditional student's needs. This would also allow for the individual differences inherent in the older student population (Lindeman, 1926).

Teaching Strategies

Although relatively little has been written to suggest specific strategies to aid the basic speech instructor in integrating the nontraditional student, research in the area of andragogy suggests directions which can apply to the basic course. Underlying the andragogical approach to teaching is the necessity for the instructor to evaluate his/her own teaching philosophies and attitudes toward integrating the nontraditional student in the traditional classroom. It is the hope of these authors that there exists a concern and a desire among

communication professionals to improve teaching skills with regard to the nontraditional student. Before implementing specific strategies, it is essential communication instructors teaching at every level of student competency familiarize themselves with the nontraditional student's specific needs and learning styles.

Given this awareness by basic course instructors, specific strategies can now be explored as options for the instructor in integrating the student into the traditional classroom.

Knowles (1978) suggests teaching through modeling. "In teaching through modeling, the teacher behaves in ways that he wants the learner to imitate. The teacher's basic technique is role modeling" (p. 87). Modeling is especially important while teaching the basic communication course as the instructor embodies the skills being taught. Students look at the instructor as a model/standard of what is expected of them.

The basic speech course instructor must know the ability of the nontraditional student before he/she can realistically set expectations. Knowles (1978) and Berryman-Fink (1982) strongly suggest a needs assessment be conducted at the beginning of each quarter. While a needs assessment would give the instructor an idea of how the nontraditional student compares to the rest of the class, one-to-one student/instructor consultation is also advised. This gives the instructor a chance to meet with the nontraditional student and discover any special needs and underlying factors. At this time, referrals to study skills centers, speech apprehension programs, and other specialized

programs may be initiated and reinforced, if needed, throughout the quarter.

Being aware of individual student's needs through assessment and consultation is an important step, yet this step is lost if no further action is taken by the instructor to integrate the student. Direct student involvement in the teaching-learning process is one method of integrating the nontraditional student. Carl Rogers (1969) is a strong supporter of this method of teaching. Many communication educators follow Rogers' ideas toward teaching the nontraditional student. DeBois (1968), Warren (1973), Ross and Wagner (1979), and Reynolds and Koob (1982) all advocate a discussion mode of teaching, wherein students discuss topics and interest areas.

Another strategy which could evolve from this discussion mode is the employment of learning-teaching teams (Knowles, 1970). In the learning-teaching team each group selects, or is given, a specific topic area to research, organize, and teach to the class. The teacher then acts as a facilitator in this mode. While these learning-teaching teams are an effective mode of theory instruction, they also serve as a tool to further cultivate interpersonal, small group, and public speaking skills.

Basic communication course instructors can also utilize student centered techniques through the use of skill practice groups (Knowles, 1970). In skill practice groups students could practice a skill, simulate real life situations through role-playing, then process the exercise by keeping a journal. Since experience is the richest resource for adult learning (Cleugh, 1970;

Knowles, 1970, 1978; Langerman, 1974; Lindeman, 1926) the use of role-playing and journal writing directly capitalizes on this resource.

Whatever type of method employed in teaching, research supports the premise that for the nontraditional student, teaching that is student centered with the instructor acting as a facilitator is more rewarding. Knowles (1978) suggests that, to expand on the nontraditional student's experience in small groups, the groups be varied heterogeneously and homogeneously.

Regardless of the choice of framework employed in teaching the basic course, the instructor can take some relatively minor action to integrate the nontraditional student. Gibson (1980) advocates the use of visual aids as a means for the nontraditional student to alleviate ambiguity and increase understanding of the material. Secondly, Knowles (1978) suggests a learning environment be characterized by a physical seating arrangement which is conducive to class interaction (preferably no person sitting behind another person). Finally, it is important for the instructor of the basic course to acknowledge each student as a student of worth and to encourage the expression and acceptence of all students' feelings and ideas.

Evaluation

The accurate and fair evaluation of learning in the classroom is of major concern to all instructors, but has specific implications for the nontraditional student. To best meet the needs of the nontraditional student in the basic speech class, it is imperative an evaluation procedure clearly define

expectations, be supportive, and directly involve the student.

Clearly defined expectations are important in the learning environment. With "sharp and clear" learning objectives introduced early in the quarter or semester, "appraisal can be conducted in a meaningful way" (Kidd, 1973, p. 284). More (1974) suggests that adult learners have a lower tolerance for ambiguity, therefore implying that this need for clarity of expectations is even more important to the nontraditional student. In addition, it can be expected that many of the nontraditional students in the conventional basic speech class will have limited experience with college evaluation procedures, therefore making it important to clearly define these expectations. Hayes & Osborn (1974) suggest that the adult learner be able to express an understanding of why the instructor will be asking certain kinds of questions, and that all objectives--course as well as participant's--be written out.

Cleugh (1970) directly addresses the importance for the evaluation procedure to be supportive of the nontraditional student when he notes that "the most favourable conditions are when students...feel sufficiently free to regard their supervisors as consultants, not judges" (p. 92). This does not imply a lowering of standards. Cleugh (1970) further asserts that although "no one wants to fail...adults still less want to feel that they have a gained a qualification without deserving it, and which, therefore, they cannot respect" (p. 110).

This supportiveness in evaluation can best be seen in the <u>focus</u> of the evaluation. It should always be clear that the

focus of the evaluation is the learning, not the person (has s/he achieved what was expected as specified in the objectives?). In communication courses, the instructor may need to make a special effort to help the individual see that evaluation of the communication skill is not evaluation of the communicator as a person. Rogers (1969), in discussing the role of educator as facilitator, addresses the qualities of the supportive environment when he notes that the facilitator of learning is "sensitive," has "trust and respect" for the adult learner, and utilizes "accurate listening" (pp. 106-126). All these qualities are important in the evaluation process, especially with the awareness that the nontraditional student typically lacks self confidence (Berryman-Fink, 1982), and needs to be seen as a mature, self directing adult who is not treated as a child (Knowles, 1970, 1978; Lindeman, 1926).

The process of evaluation can be threatening to the non-traditional student. Kidd (1976) points out that "to most adults the words 'test,' 'quiz'...call forth unpleasant memories" (p. 285), making it difficult to use these assessment tools with the adult groups. Knowles (1970) asserts that the "act of a teacher giving a grade to a student" is the "crowning instance of incongruity between traditional educational practice and the adult's self concept of self directivity." Being judged by another adult "is the ultimate sign of disrespect and dependency" (p. 43).

An immediate response to the need of the adult to be self directing in evaluation is found in the technique of self

evaluation. With the instructor's assistance and guidance, the adult student sets educational goals and compiles evidence about learning progress toward these goals. Knowles (1970) utilizes the phrase "rediagnosis of learning needs" instead of "evaluation." This approach could be easily adapted to the communication classroom where a student can assess achievement of speaking skills after each speech, or achievement of discussion leadership skills after each discussion, and then set new learning goals for the next speaking or discussion assignment.

Knowles (1970) suggests the use of communication skills performance assessment as valuable to the adult student in the communication classroom. A student's speech is rated by other participants on public speaking scales (such as language usage, organization, voice, etc...) and a composite rating is transposed into a profile sheet which helps the student assess learning needs and set objectives. This can be repeated at a later date in the quarter or semester for assessment of progress.

Hayes and Osborn (1974) suggest that students work in conjunction with the instructor to come to an agreement on the kinds of evaluation which are to take place--"pencil and paper, peer evaluation, individual conference, group discussion, etc..." (p. 154). This could be integrated into the task for a group problem solving discussion unit in the basic course, allowing the students to feel respected as adults, at the same time working with one of the units in the hybrid course. Regardless of approach selected, because individual differences among people increase with age (Knowles, 1978), it seems imperative that the

nontraditional student evaluation process make provision for differences in style and pace of learning as much as possible.

In the final analysis, one aspect of adult learning theory seems to apply to the evaluation process as well. The key in effective evaluation (as in effective teaching) of the nontraditional student appears to be that when "given a choice between two techniques, choose the one involving the student in the most active participation" (Knowles, 1970, p. 294).

Heuristic Implications

The nontraditional student's role in the conventional basic speech class has been a neglected area of study. This treatise has attempted to demonstrate the need to attend to the nontraditional student in the basic speech class, to address problem areas, and to suggest strategies for integrating the nontraditional student. The next stages of research suggest not only implementation of these strategies, but also assessment of their practicality and success. In addition to the need to research the effectiveness of these suggested strategies, there is a concomitant need to assess the requirements of those nontraditional students who are actually in our basic speech courses. What are these students experiencing in the conventional basic speech classes?

Another need area which naturally evolves from this research is that of furthered education for those speech professionals who will be teaching the nontraditional students in their classes. This becomes even more important with the increasing evidence

that inexperienced graduate and undergarduate students are instructing the basic course (Baisinger et al., 1984; Gibson et al., 1980).

The andragogical approach to instruction appears to the authors of this paper to be what we would value as effective fundamental teaching skills. Is it possible that implementation of these strategies would enhance the learning experience of both the traditional and nontraditional student? This question warrants further investigation.

The nontraditional student promises to become a familiar personality in the basic speech class. The potential for a richer teaching/learning experience rests in the effectiveness of the instructor to harness and use the contributions of all its members. It is essential that direct action be taken to purposefully integrate the nontraditional student into the basic speech class.

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